

(Aunt Ester exits into her room. Black Mary chops vegetables at the sink. Citizen enters with a bucket.)

? CITIZEN: Eli sent me for some water.
BLACK MARY: There it is over there.

(Citizen starts to draw the water.)

You knocked some of the paint off the sill coming through the window.

(Citizen is taken aback.)

CITIZEN: I couldn't wait till Tuesday. I got to get my soul washed real bad. You ever had your soul washed?

BLACK MARY: God's the only one can wash your soul.

CITIZEN: The people sent me to see Aunt Ester. One man say he came to see Aunt Ester and all his problems went away. Say she can help anybody.

BLACK MARY: You got to help yourself. Aunt Ester can help you if you willing to help yourself. She ain't got no magic power.

CITIZEN: The people say, "Go see Aunt Ester and get your soul washed."

BLACK MARY: The people say a lot of things.

CITIZEN: I like your hands. You got pretty hands.

BLACK MARY: I do too much laundry to have pretty hands. They're a woman's hands. That's all you see.

CITIZEN: Eli your man?

BLACK MARY: I ain't got no man.

CITIZEN: You too young a woman not to have a man.

BLACK MARY: You a young man . . . do you have a woman?

CITIZEN: I left my woman down in Alabama. We just couldn't get along. We said good-bye with tears in our eyes. You ever left anybody like that?

BLACK MARY: I left and been left.

(Citizen picks up the bucket and heads toward the door. He stops.)

CITIZEN: My room right next to yours . . . maybe you wanna come see me tonight.

BLACK MARY: What I want to see you about, Mr. Citizen?

CITIZEN: I got something for you.

BLACK MARY: What you got for me?

CITIZEN: A woman's got needs. I can fill you up.

BLACK MARY: What you know about a woman's needs.

CITIZEN: I don't know all about a woman . . . but I know a woman needs a man.

(Citizen moves behind her and puts his arms around her. Black Mary pushes him away and twists her way out of his grasp. She looks at him for a beat, then opens her arms, offering herself to him.)

BLACK MARY: Here, Mr. Citizen. Here.

(Citizen embraces her. Black Mary lays her head on his chest.)

You got a woman in your hands. Now what? What you got? What you gonna do? Time ain't long, Mr. Citizen. A woman ain't but so many times filled up. What you gonna do? What you gonna fill me up with? Love? Happiness? Peace? What you got, Mr. Citizen? I seen it all. You got something new? Fill me up, Mr. Citizen. What you got for me, you got something I ain't seen? Come on. What can I be without you?

(Citizen steps out of her embrace.)

CITIZEN: I'm a man. I can't change that. You a woman. A man's gonna have his way with a woman. I got the same as everybody else.

(Black Mary returns to chopping vegetables.)

BLACK MARY: Leroy. And John. And Cujoe. And Sam. And Robert. One after the other they come and they go. You can't hold on to none of them. They slip right through your hands. They use you up and you can't hold them. They all the time taking till it's gone. They ain't tried to put nothing to it. They ain't got nothing in their hand. They ain't got nothing to add to it. They too busy taking. They taking 'cause they need. You can't blame them for that. They so full of their needs they can't see you. Now here you come. You don't even know what you need. All you see is a woman. You can't see nothing else. You can't think nothing else. That blinds you.

(Black Mary turns to him. A new thought occurs to her.)

Okay, Mr. Citizen. I'll come to your room tonight. But the morning got to come, Mr. Citizen. What you got then? You tell me tomorrow. You wake up and look at your hands and see what you got.

CITIZEN: I got me. That's all there is.

BLACK MARY: That ain't never gonna be enough. **|**

(Citizen picks up the bucket and goes out the door.

Black Mary chops vigorously as the lights go down on the scene.)

SCENE 5

The lights come up on Aunt Ester and Black Mary in the parlor. Black Mary is washing Aunt Ester's feet. Aunt Ester is smoking a pipe.

AUNT ESTER: **|**You think you supposed to know everything. Life is a mystery. Don't you know life is a mystery? I see you still trying to figure it out. It ain't all for you to know. It's all an adventure. That's all life is. But you got to trust that adven-

ture. I'm on an adventure. I been on one since I was nine years old. That's how old I was when my mama sent me to live with Miss Tyler. Miss Tyler gave me her name. Ester Tyler. I don't tell nobody what I was called before that. The only one know that is my mama. I stayed right on there with her till she died. Miss Tyler passed it on to me. If you ever make up your mind I'm gonna pass it on to you. People say it's too much to carry. But I told myself somebody got to carry it. Miss Ester carried it. Carried it right up till the day she died. I didn't run from it. I picked it up and walked with it. I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they'd eat me up. I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own. If you don't want it I got to find somebody else. I'm getting old. Going on three hundred years now. That's what Miss Tyler told me. Two hundred eighty-five by my count.

BLACK MARY: I ain't say I didn't want it.

AUNT ESTER: You act like it. Run from it all the time. I told myself Black Mary got to make up her mind. I don't know how much time I got left. Go upstairs and get Mr. Citizen. Tell him I want to see him. You can cut my toenails later. **|**

(Black Mary exits up the stairs. Aunt Ester lights her pipe. Citizen enters from the stairs.)

Sit on down there, Mr. Citizen. It's been a good day, Mr. Citizen. Has it been a good day for you? Sometimes the days run into one another and you can't tell one from another. I can look at you and see you a man got good taste. My husband was like that. He was a man of good taste. He dead now. I told myself it couldn't be nothing but bad luck. Sometimes it's hard to tell bad luck from good luck but then